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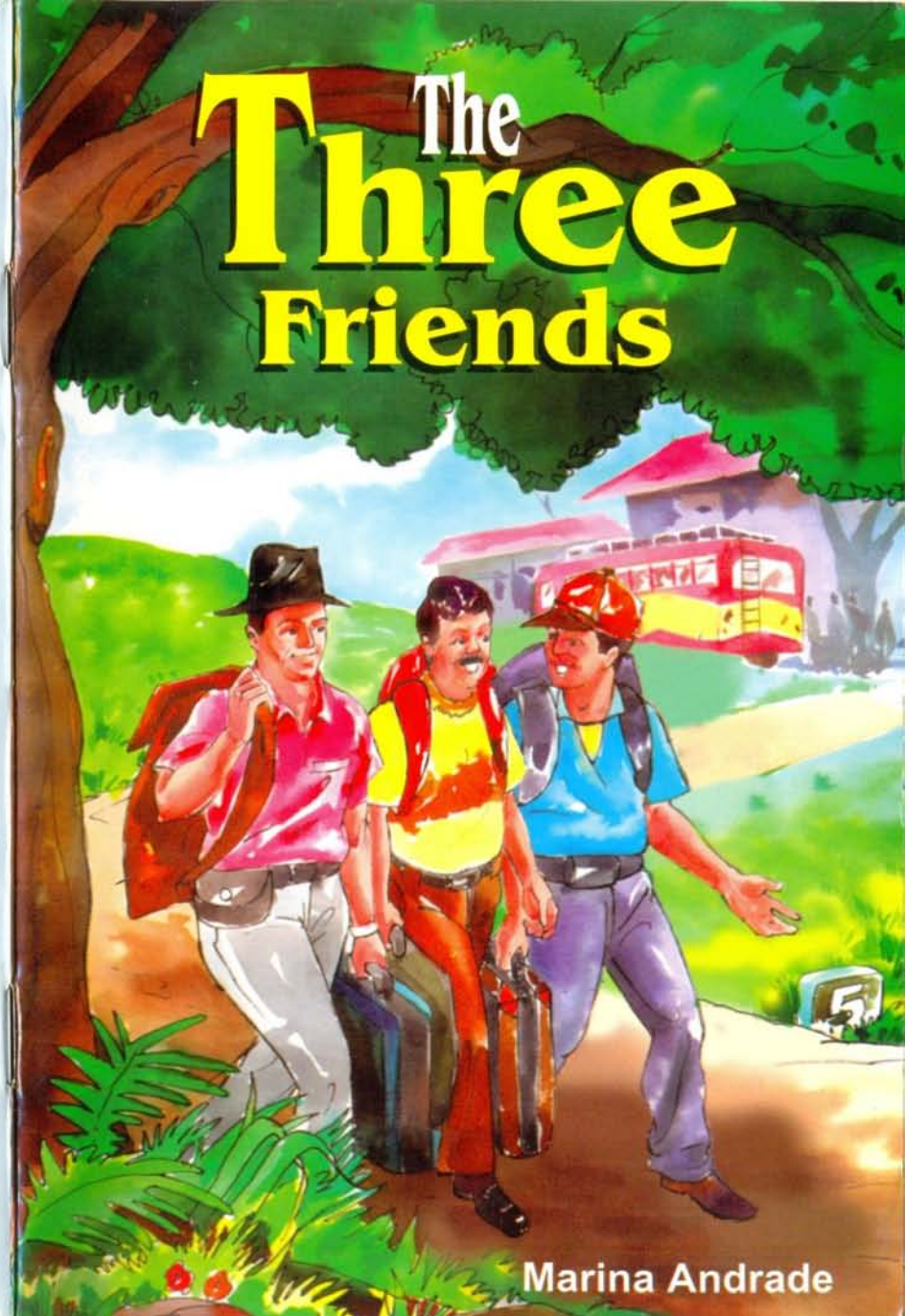
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The Three Friends




Marina Andrade

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The Three Friends

Cover by Kishor Govilkar

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1. The Three Friends

One evening, many years ago three rich friends, Karun, Tarun and Varun met. They decided to migrate to the nearby town and settle down there. Before leaving they went to a wise man to seek his blessing.

The wise man was brief: "As you sow so shall you reap. Wish you all the best," he said.

The trio set off with some clothes and a little food for the journey. The town was a few miles away. They journeyed some distance by bus and then on foot. They reached their destination at sunset.

As a temporary arrangement each man took a small room on rent. The rooms were part of a house with a red-tiled roof belonging to Mr Pranay. According to the terms of agreement the men were to stay there as tenants for a couple of years.

The bachelors occupied themselves in lucrative businesses. Karun set up an ice-cream unit, Tarun was the owner of a tea shop and Varun sold ready-made garments. Karun and Tarun paid attention to customer service and maintained the standard of their products, whereas Varun often cheated his customers and sold substandard goods.

Two years went by. When it was time to vacate the premises they had rented, each man had made sufficient money and was ready to buy a house of his own.

"I am about to buy a cozy house with mosaic flooring. The owner is in dire need of money and has agreed to sell it," said Karun with a beaming smile.

"Soon we'll have to part. I am buying a house two miles away and will have to spend quite some time commuting daily," said Tarun, shrugging his shoulders.

"As for me, I'll buy the vacant green house down the street. It looks good and is not very far off from my work place," said Varun, quite pleased with himself.



Karun was kind and good at heart. Before leaving he painted his room and handed over the keys to the owner.

Tarun was an indifferent type. He did not maintain his room well. It was full of cobwebs, dirt and dust.

Varun was the worst—a careless person. The bulb in his room had fused and the tap was leaking. Although he had money he did not replace them. Moreover, he had stuck pictures on the walls and the paint was peeling off.

Mr Pranay was a good man. He knew that each person was of a different nature. He wished the men good luck and bid them good-bye.

For some time all was well with the three men in their new homes. Business was flourishing. But in the monsoon there was torrential rain. There was devastation down the road in the low-lying area where Varun was living. The flood water rushed into his house and his goods were damaged.

When Karun heard about Varun's distress he said to Tarun, "Let us go and help Varun."

"How can we go? The route is submerged under water. We have to wait for the water to subside," replied Tarun wrinkling his forehead.

When the water subsided Karun and Tarun reached Varun's house with great difficulty. The road was dirty and muddy. Varun was cleaning his house and discarding all the damaged materials. He was not happy with himself. He resolved to begin a new life. The wise man's advice kept reverberating in his mind:

'As you sow so shall you reap.'

2. Victory for Rex

Bess and Rex lived with their two children Chris and Joy. Rex had no job and there was no money to maintain their small cottage.

It was springtime. The birds chirped and flowers blossomed. Dewdrops glistened on the grass in the early morning sunlight. The fragrant scent of roses lingered in the air.

"Tomorrow is Joy's birthday. I did not stitch her a new dress," said Bess, looking at her husband.

"I have to settle some debts and don't have money just now. Jobs are hard to get. Perhaps we can sell this cottage and go to the next village across the forest. I hear the cost of living there is lower."

"That's a good idea. We'll put up this house for sale and pack up," said Bess.

"I can wait for my new dress until matters improve," said Joy.

"Do we have to leave this house?" asked Chris.

"Yes, one of my creditors is willing to give me a good price for it. I'll sell it to him," said his father.

Rex sold his house and the family moved out with their belongings. At sunset they reached the edge of a forest. They were tired walking. Moreover, it would be dangerous to travel at night. So they rested under a tree.

"Look at that old man carrying his luggage across the street. The load is too heavy for him. Can you help him?" said Bess to her husband, pointing out to the man.

Rex went up to the man and said, "Sir, may I help you with your baggage?"

The old man was really very weak. He handed over his bags gladly and straightened himself. The duo walked a short distance, the old man leading the way to his house.

On reaching his home the old man asked, "Who are you?"

Rex told his sad tale and said, "I am moving house with my family and frantically looking for a job."

The old man said, "Here, take this money. Go to the next village and set up a coffee shop in a makeshift tent. You will prosper. Remember to give a cup of coffee to a poor man every day: God blesses generous people."

Some people are generous by nature. Some people do a little charity when a big fortune comes their way. Some people are asked to be generous. Others have to be reminded about generosity. Rex belonged to the last group.

He accepted the money and told his wife about the old man. The next day they reached the new village and set up a coffee shop. Bess prepared coffee and the children helped. There was a poor man who was starving nearby. He slept under a ledge. They gave him a cup of coffee every day.

As luck would have it, the coffee shop had many customers and the family prospered.

"At last I'll be able to stitch new clothes for my children," said Bess.

Chris and Joy were glad to have new clothes. They prayed every morning and thanked God for helping them to run the coffee shop.

After a year or so Rex said to his wife, "I am earning sufficiently well. It is too hot in the coffee tent. I will set up a regular coffee shop and appoint a manager. We can afford to take things easy now."

Then Rex appointed a manager and gave him instructions on how to run the shop. Bess and the children did not have to work as hard as before.

The manager showed keen interest in his work. When Rex was completely satisfied about his ability he handed over complete charge to him.

Initially the manager was honest and maintained correct accounts. Thereafter he cheated the owner of funds. He also neglected to give the poor man at the door a cup of coffee.

The coffee shop soon had to be closed due to losses. The manager was dismissed.

Rex was back again at the start and his family suffered. They could no longer afford comforts and had to lead a simple life.

Rex sat under a tree with his face in his cupped hands. He was thinking about what to do next. The old acquaintance who had helped him earlier saw him and inquired after his family. When he heard of Rex's troubles he sympathized with him and said, "Here, take this money and open a lunch home. This is an industrial area and business will catch up. In your good days don't forget to give the poor man in the street a meal every day."

Rex looked up at the familiar face and thanked the man for his advice and help. Without wasting time he opened a lunch home which was patronized by all the labourers in the locality. Business flourished and Rex gave the poor man in the street lunch every day.

The family had plenty of food and luxuries now. Their life style changed. Rex built a small house with the money he earned. The children went to school.

"Cash is flowing in steadily and good days are back again. I am a rich man now. We have two cooks and a boy for sundry jobs. Things are going on with clock-like regularity. I can appoint a manager and relax now," said Rex.

"Don't you know what happened when you relaxed last time? The coffee shop manager cheated us and did not give coffee to the poor beggar. This is a small lunch home and we can look after it ourselves," said Bess.

"If we appoint a manager he will do things his way. If he is a good person he will be honest. If I was old enough I would have looked after the place," said Chris.

"We will complete our studies soon and help our parents," said Joy with a smile.

"Let me relax for some time and see how things work out," said Rex and appointed a manager for the lunch home.

The manager was a selfish man. Like the previous manager, he too did not give proper accounts to Rex. Rex never checked the accounts and did not know that he was being cheated. The manager also stopped giving

meals to the poor man in the street. One evening he took all the money from the cash box and some other items and never returned. When Rex came to know of his losses he was shocked. He was again back at the start.

Bess too was disturbed. She said, "Did I not tell you what would happen if you relaxed? You appointed an efficient staff but made a mistake in parting with complete responsibility. You failed to check the accounts regularly."

"That apart, the manager stopped giving meals to the poor man," said Chris and Joy in unison.

"Yes, you are right. If I stay away from the work place we won't prosper," agreed Rex.

"What's all this discussion about?" said a stranger. They looked at him in some surprise. "I am the same old man you helped some time back with the luggage."

Rex told the old man all that had happened.

"My dear man, it is never too late to learn. Open a coffee-cum-lunch house. The people are always hungry and you will have good

business. People can save on clothes and other items but they cannot starve. You may not find it interesting to sit in the work place all the time but you must not neglect it totally. Begin again and you will prosper. When they are old enough your children will help you. Keep active and remember to give the poor disabled man at the door a cup of coffee and a meal every day," said the stranger and left.

Rex was glad to hear the words of encouragement. He opened the coffee-cum-lunch house. He had some experience by now and an efficient staff assisted him. He relaxed when he was tired but he never neglected his work. Every day he fed the old man and comforted him. His family was happy and he prospered.

Duty done is victory won.

3. Lazy Romi

Roshan was a wholesale dealer in fruits and vegetables. The regular customers who came to his shop purchased their requirements in bulk. As there was a good demand Roshan reaped steady profits. Eventually, competition between the traders increased. For this reason Roshan wanted to educate his son Romi in order to prepare him for a suitable career.

Reena said to her husband Roshan, "Our son has passed his school final at his second attempt. Perhaps we can send him to college."

Roshan nodded his head in the affirmative.

Romi who was sitting and listening to the conversation was not too pleased. He was a careless boy and did not take studies seriously. Many times, his mother had to remind him to study. He did not realize that in this life words of good advice were actually pearls of wisdom.

"I don't want to join college," said Romi.

"Nowadays there are good opportunities for education. I am ready to help you," said the father, trying to persuade his son who was not too keen.

At this point, Prashant, a family friend, visited them and said, "In our friend's factory they are looking for weavers."

"What are they manufacturing?" asked Romi carelessly.

"Don't you know they weave handloom cloth?" replied Roshan, staring at his son.

"That may be a good opportunity for Romi to start off and get experience. Later on he can have his own business," said Reena, hoping her son had some hidden skills that would bring about a change in his attitude to life.

Reena was a humble woman. She had lived a hard life but was not at all inclined to sit back and relax despite her husband's prosperity. With an irresponsible son like Romi what could she do? Any amount of motivation seemed inadequate to evoke a sense of responsibility in him. Reena kept aside a little money every day for future uncertainties. At

festival times she prepared good meals. On Romi's birthday she gave him new clothes and kept him happy.

Roshan hoped and prayed that Romi would come up to his expectations but there seemed to be no such luck. Other boys of his son's age were ambitious. They were an asset to their families. Roshan said, "Romi, you can't stay idle. Try some job and see if you have an aptitude for some type of work. You can be an apprentice. There is no harm in trying."

Romi hesitated a moment and slowly said, "O.K."

There were not many applicants for the job and Romi got a posting. The next day his mother packed lunch for him. After breakfast, Romi prayed to God and left for work.

On the way, Romi gossiped with the people he met, whistled a tune and thought it would be a good day's fun with colleagues. He had a small lunch-break and then he had to apply himself to the job until evening. Weaving was something new to him but he did not like the fact that he had to do the work all day long.

In the evening when Romi returned his mother asked, "How do you like your job?"

"I still have to learn to like it. It is too early to say anything," said Romi, not sure of himself. His mother only hoped that all would be well.

Many times Romi felt that he badly needed a break. In a month or so he told his mother, "I don't like this job—the continuous rattling sound in the place drives me mad. I feel like giving up."

"Wait until you get another job. Don't give up so soon. You want to make a decent living, don't you?" said his mother, trying to keep her son cheerful.

A few months went by. One day, Rajan, a cousin, came home and said to Romi, "there is a vacancy for an assistant in the button factory. Do you know anyone who wants the job?"

Romi thought of changing his job and moving on to the button factory. He told his mother about his idea. She was an understanding lady and felt that the time had come for her son to make a change. Moreover Romi would get a better position. She said to

her husband, "Romi is getting a chance to switch over to the post of an assistant. Perhaps he can take this opportunity and be happier.

Roshan thought, 'My son is still young. Let him try and see to which life he can adjust,' and allowed him to do as he pleased.

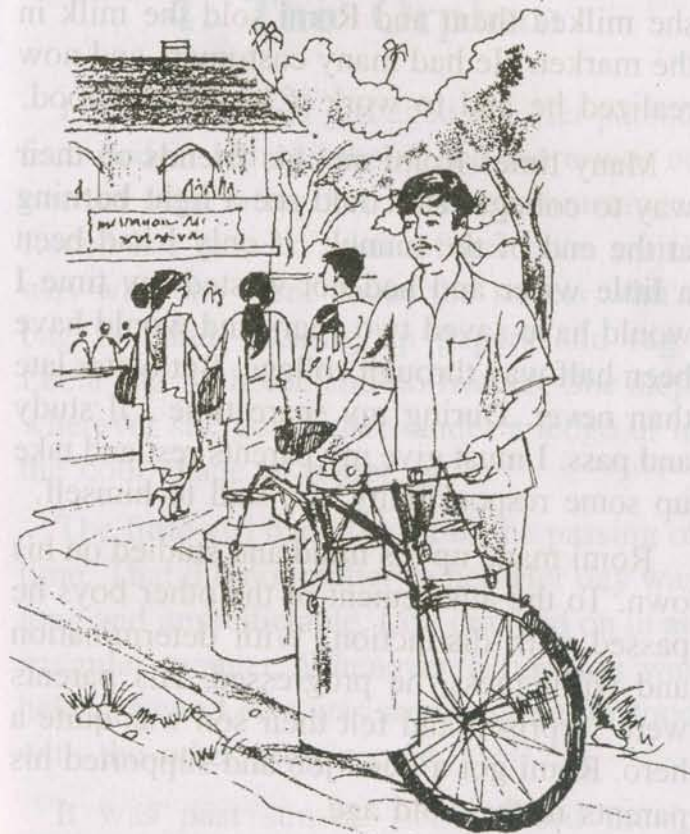
As an assistant in the button factory Romi brought home his pay every month. His parents were happy but Romi felt that factory life was monotonous. Every day he came home and complained about it.

Roshan said to his son, "Romi, you have a good job. Why complain? There are so many people struggling without a job."

'If Romi were to remain with the job it would be a miracle,' thought Reena. She had a nagging fear that he would soon give up.

One day Romi said, "I have decided to stay at home. I don't want to spend my time in the factory."

No amount of parental advice helped Romi. His mother said, "I'll buy two cows. Romi can help me to sell the milk and we can prosper. If he wishes he can study during his



spare time." She was an optimistic lady always having other options in view.

Reena bought two cows. Every morning she milked them and Romi sold the milk in the market. He had many customers and now realized he had to work if he wanted food.

Many times Romi met his friends on their way to college. He could see a light burning at the end of the tunnel. 'If only I had been a little wiser and had not wasted my time I would have saved two years and would have been half way through college. But better late than never. During my spare time I'll study and pass. I must give my parents rest and take up some responsibility,' he said to himself.

Romi made up his mind and studied on his own. To the amazement of the other boys he passed with distinction. With determination and willingness, he progressed. His parents were surprised and felt their son was quite a hero. Romi got a good job and supported his parents in their old age.

Learning by listening to good advice is better than learning through hard experience.

4. The Orphan

Leela was a poor girl aged six. Her parents had died in her childhood and there was no one to look after her. Bad circumstances forced her to seek a life of her own, which was why she went about the streets with a bag in hand, picking up papers and rags. Leela had no home and no friends. She slept wherever she got shelter, under a ledge or in the cool shade of a tree.

The little girl had no idea of the passing of time. That did not matter to her. Her day was long and unpredictable. Life dragged on in an irregular manner. Whenever a function was held in town Leela was seen waiting for food with the other poor people.

It was past sunset. Leela heard music coming from an illuminated house. She peeped through the window. Two children Nalini and Shalini were playing inside. They had a small

wooden house for their doll Goldie. Nalini and Shalini had lacy skirts and flowing hair. The girls led a fairy tale life. A fluffy teddy bear turned round and round at the turn of a key. Strangely, nothing held their interest for long. They were selfish. They quarrelled among themselves and messed up the house. As for Leela, there was no way of mixing with children of high society.

Mother came in, tray in hand. "Here, what's all this noise about? Have these mangoes," she said.

"I don't want dinner today," said Nalini.

"Nor do I," yelled Shalini.

"They are lucky to be in such a grand house. If I had a mother I would have helped and obeyed her. What a nice aroma! Their mother provides the girls good food but they are yelling at one another about petty matters," thought Leela.

When it was quite dark and the moon was shining Leela slept in a corner of a tea shop. In her dream she saw a kind lady bending over her and asking her to have a cup of hot

tea. 'I'll help her out by washing the dishes,' thought Leela still in her dream. Just then she was awakened by a dog barking. Realizing it was only a beautiful dream she sank again into deep slumber.

Leela did not know anything about a good life. She longed to belong somewhere and help in the daily chores but the girl did not have high hopes. She had seen modern girls. 'I cannot have frilly frocks. I cannot live in a mansion. All I wish to have is a little food to satisfy my hunger,' thought Leela.

The following day was a sunny day. The birds were chirping. The squirrels frisked about and the bees were gathering honey. Leela was dark and skinny. With her hair in knots and her shabby dress she looked ugly.

Sister Gulabi with her maid was on her way to the market. Seeing Leela, she held out her hand and spoke to her gently. "Come along with me. I'll give you some food," Sr Gulabi said kindly and Leela went with her.

Sr Gulabi did not have a magic wand to transform Leela into a Cinderella but she

bathed the girl, gave her a new dress and combed her hair. Leela was now in the orphanage with a few companions.

In the orphanage, Leela got more than she expected. The day began with a morning prayer. Meals were assured and the children were well-cared for. The older children helped the staff to look after the younger ones and each girl was assigned duties. The girls were sent to the school meant for poor children and in addition to studies, were given opportunities to develop hobbies like cooking and gardening.

Leela had a corner of her own. She could sleep without fear. She looked better and felt good.

Childless couples came to the orphanage looking for children for adoption. Good-looking and plump children had no difficulty in finding a home. Leela looked with longing eyes at the people who came to take a child to adopt. Sr Gulabi hoped and prayed that her future would be bright.

In town there was a rich spinster called Jalaja. Her relatives were far away. Moreover,

Jalaja suffered frequently from ill health. She wanted to adopt a girl who would look after her in her old age and inherit her property. Jalaja planned a trip to the orphanage. She made up her mind to take the first girl she set her eyes on.

The following day Jalaja went to Sr Gulabi. The latter invited her in and the first girl Jalaja happened to set her eyes on was Leela. After completing all the formalities the lady hugged the girl and called her to her car.

Leela reluctantly bade farewell to Sr Gulabi and went with her new mother, travelling for the first time in a car. Overnight Leela had a new identity. The next day there was a great celebration and Leela had to cut a cake. Slowly, she learnt the way she had to live her new life. She had never expected fortune to smile on her and change her life so suddenly. She got beautiful clothes, frilly frocks, pretty pointy shoes and lots of other things. She kissed her new mother and praised the Lord!

Leela went to a good school in town. Though newly-rich the girl was kind-hearted.

Among her friends were Nalini and Shalini. Leela shared her lunch with those who were not so lucky to have good food. She played with those children who longed for company. She took them home occasionally and gave them sweets. She helped her mother and was a source of joy to her.

Always count your blessings. Help others and be a source of joy.

5. Suman's Holiday

Aunt Mala had arrived in town a week ago. Her nephew Nitin liked her very much. He was her pet. Whenever his mum Sarala was busy, aunty played with the child. She took him out to the flower garden and he felt like a real gardener when he helped in watering the plants. Aunty knew Nitin's tastes. She prepared special sweets for him. Then, Aunt Mala got married and left for a far off place. That was a few years back.

Sarala called her son to her and said, "Do you remember Aunt Mala?"

Nitin's eyes brightened. Since aunty had left, each day without her was a strange day but gradually he had got used to it. He remembered her pretty face, long flowing hair, her ladoos and love of flowers.

"Yes, of course!" said Nitin.

"There's a surprise for you. Aunty will be coming with Suman, her son," said Mum.

"When will they arrive?" asked Nitin in excitement.

"Tomorrow, by the evening flight. Suman is your cousin," said Sarala.

"How old is Suman?" asked Nitin.

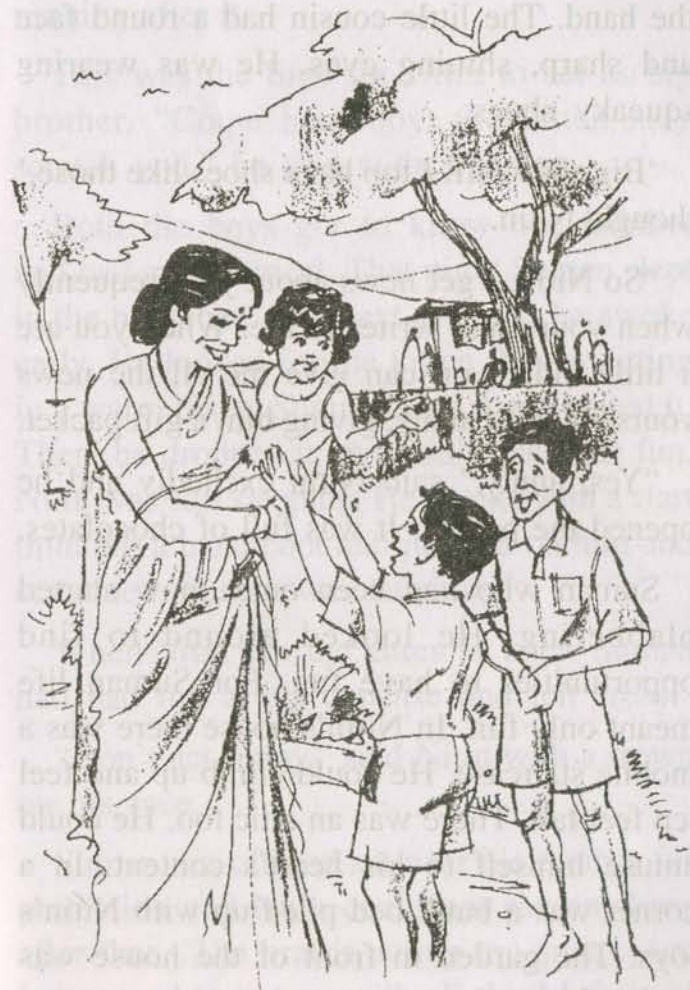
"About three years," said his mum smiling.

From then on, Nitin's mind was preoccupied with pleasant thoughts. 'How nice to have Aunt Mala here once again! Suman will be a real playmate. We'll play a lot of games,' thought Nitin.

The next day Nitin told his best friend Yesha, "My cousin Suman will be coming home this evening. Come and be with us at the weekend. We'll have a lot of fun."

Yesha was a tall, active boy. He never missed any fun. He readily agreed.

In the evening Aunt Mala arrived with Suman. Nitin was eager to know what his cousin was like. "Hi Nitin," said aunty.



"Hi aunty! Happy to see you Suman," said Nitin, greeting his cousin and taking him by the hand. The little cousin had a round face and sharp, shining eyes. He was wearing squeaky shoes.

'Big show off. I too have shoes like those,' thought Nitin.

"So Nitin, I get news about you frequently when your mum writes to me. When you are a little older you can give me all the news yourself," said aunty, giving him a gift packet.

"Yes, aunty," said Nitin excitedly and he opened the packet. It was full of chocolates.

Suman who had been quiet, now started blabbering. He looked around to find opportunities to have fun. For Suman life meant only fun. In Nitin's house there was a mobile staircase. He could climb up and feel ten feet tall. There was an attic too. He could amuse himself to his heart's content. In a corner was a bunk bed piled up with Nitin's toys. The garden in front of the house was enchanting.

As Suman was getting settled he saw a pretty white and yellow kitten. He started running after it.

This was the time for Nitin to act as big brother. "Come here boy, the kitten may scratch you," he said with affection.

Both the boys got to know one another and had a good meal. That night Suman slept in the bunk bed. The next morning he awoke early. He looked for the kitten. It was sitting in a warm place. Suman lifted it and patted it. Then, he dropped it on Nitin's chest for fun. Nitin was still sleeping. He awoke with a start thinking a bandicoot had jumped on him and screamed. Suman was laughing.

When Nitin saw the kitten he knew Suman had had fun at his expense and felt cross.

"Don't act funny," said Nitin with a frown on his face.

Suman ran off and sat near his mother for protection and Nitin could not say anything after that. 'The brat is acting too smart. Am I supposed to put up with all this? I thought

I'd have a companion who would play with me,' thought Nitin.

At the weekend Yesha came to play with the boys. "Don't go too far," said Aunt Mala. "Suman may land in trouble." So the boys had to play around the house.

Nitin went near the rose plants and the other two boys followed. "The thorns may prick the child. Take care," said Sarala.

"You are a touch-me-not," said Nitin looking at Suman in disgust. "Everyone treats you as if you are a piece of glass." He felt the kid got too much attention.

"He is too small to play with us," said Yesha. "Let's play some game that will suit his age."

"That will not interest me," replied Nitin as he went home and sank back into a chair. 'I wonder when he will go back,' he thought.

The following week the little family celebrated Suman's birthday. Mala baked a big cake and Sarala prepared sweets. They bought a few gifts for the little boss. It was

his day and he felt great. There were a few neighbouring children and Nitin had a good time too. He felt like a master of ceremonies but that was only for a day. Suman overate and fell ill. He got a lot of attention. He ran about, watched TV whenever he felt like it and no one objected.

Usually Sarala allowed Nitin to watch TV only for a limited time. "Why can't I watch TV whenever I wish?" asked Nitin.

"You have your studies to do," would be his mother's reply.

Mala gave the boys chocolates. Suman ate very clumsily and with his brown fingers, touched Nitin's good shirt. It was a mistake, but the little fellow was always making mistakes. Nitin could not take it any more.

'I'll show you that you have to respect me,' he thought. Then Nitin asked his mum, "Can we play outside?"

It was afternoon. The ladies wanted to have a midday siesta. Sarala allowed the boys to go out and play. "Don't go very far," she said.

Nitin went near a jackfruit tree not too far away, with Suman following behind. Then, he lifted the youngster and kept him on a thick branch, high enough for Suman to need help to get down. "You stand here," said Nitin, actually wanting Suman to yell out and plead for help to get down.

Waiting to watch the fun, Nitin started walking backwards whistling a tune. Strangely, the little chap did not yell out. He was watching Nitin. Then, all of a sudden he said, "Stop, stop. You will fall." His voice sounded like an alarm bell.

Nitin stopped and looked back. There was a pit behind him. The child could see it from atop the branch. If the little boy had not raised an alarm Nitin would have landed in great trouble. He ran to the young fellow and placed him safely down on the ground. Holding his hand he took Suman home. This incident made Nitin feel proud of his cousin and he became really fond of him.

From then onwards Nitin shared his sweets and toys with Suman. He asked his mum,

"Shall we tell aunty to stay on with Suman and spend Pongal here?"

The ladies were not really asleep. They were only resting. "You tell them to extend their holiday. They will be happy to stay on," said Sarala.

"Aunty, I'd be so very pleased if you stay over with Suman till Pongal," said Nitin.

"Come here. We'll surely stay until Pongal," said Aunt Mala and she hugged Nitin.

**Forgive others their mistakes—
especially little children who are innocent.**

6. Robber Outwitted

Kaveri lived with her parents in a crowded street in town. She went to the local school and was in the fifth standard.

Kaveri's mother Pinky was a working woman. She kept tea in a flask and some snacks for her daughter before leaving for office. She said to Kaveri, "I'll be the last to leave the house. When I go out I'll leave the house key with the neighbours. When you return in the evening take it from them and open the door. Father will return soon. Don't worry. A bit of advice by way of caution.

Never open the door to a stranger. Look through the peephole and make sure who is calling. Have your tea and then begin your homework. Did you hear me?" she said.

"Yes Mum," said Kaveri absent-mindedly. Her mother was always so full of advice.

Pinky's office was far away but she had no fears for her child's safety provided she followed her advice.

Except on holidays, the family routine continued in a predictable manner. Pinky locked the door before leaving and handed over the keys to the neighbours. In the evening when Kaveri returned from school she took the keys from them and opened the lock. Then, she closed the door, had tea and began her homework. It was as simple as that. Father came home half an hour later and the system worked very well.

A few months went by. There were many thieves in the vicinity. One of them must have noticed Kaveri opening the door for her father. He decided to rob Kaveri's house.

One evening, as usual, Kaveri returned home and was having tea. The doorbell rang. The child thought that it was her father and was happy that he had come home early. She rushed and opened the door.

A man in dark glasses entered and pushed Kaveri back. He was well-dressed and was

wearing a cap. He pulled out a knife from his pocket and shutting the door behind him asked Kaveri, "Where does your mother keep her gold? If you shout I'll finish you off," he threatened.

Kaveri was frightened. She was nervous. She did not want the robber to rob her mother's gold nor did she want a stranger to threaten her in such a ferocious manner.

Pinky kept her chain and ear-rings in a small box in the dressing-table drawer. Kaveri pointed out to the drawer and the man opened it. He got the box with the chain and ear-rings.

The girl thought the man would go away but he said, "Where does your mother keep the remaining gold? I want more of it." The stranger felt his chances were good to get a great deal of gold.

Kaveri did not know what to do. She just hoped that her father would arrive. Then, all of a sudden she said pointing to a cupboard, "It is in that cupboard."

"Where is the key of that cupboard?" asked the stranger. The girl tried to be brave. Using her presence of mind she said, "It is outside, hanging on a nail above the window."

The robber left the box of trinkets where it was and went out to fetch the keys. He was filled with greed to possess more gold.

As soon as the stranger went out Kaveri banged the door shut and screamed for help.

The neighbours saw the man and rushed out and caught him. They handed him over to the police.

When Kaveri's parents returned and learnt all that had happened they were happy their child was safe and told her to remember their advice.

When Kaveri relates her experience to her classmates she adds,

"Never open the door to strangers."

7. Melons for Piggies

Mr Piggy was grumpy by nature. While Mrs Piggy looked after their piglings he wallowed in the marshy mud and grunted, "Cru, cru". When the piglings made little noises that disturbed his sleep he was very quarrelsome. He did not like them to jump on his body and run about the place grunting with squeaky voices like sirens.

Mrs Piggy, quiet and patient by nature, took the piglings along for walks, her tiny legs supporting her massive body. Her protective nature gave the little piggies complete assurance of love and affection.

Many rabbits, goats and sheep lived near the piggery in the village. The little rabbits, kids and lambs played with the piggies and had a lot of fun. During such intervals Mrs Piggy was the baby sitter. The trouble she took to keep them happy gave the piglings and the other little ones a great deal of contentment.

When his wife joined in the fun with the neighbours, Mr Piggy was displeased. He saw no sense in the nature of Mrs Piggy's work.

"Why should you look after someone else's children? We are not servants. Why should others entrust this kind of a job to you? It creates a terrible mess over here and the place is noisy," he said as he quarrelled with his wife.

Mrs Piggy kept calm. "If we help others and look after their babies they will help us in return," she said without losing her cool.

After a few days the rabbit couple decided to bring home their supply of carrots from a nearby farm. It would be a day out and the children had to be looked after. Mrs Piggy was a friend in need and was always ready to help. That would make matters easy. So, approaching Mrs Piggy they asked, "Could you look after our babies for a day? We are planning to bring home our stock of carrots and will get you some melons for your trouble," they chorused.

Delighted at the idea of having melons for her family, Mrs Piggy consented. She went in and told Mr Piggy about it. Her husband was



notorious for his rude behaviour. "Tell Mr and Mrs Rabbit that it is not possible for you to look after their young ones. You have better business. I need you around to dig up the soil so that we can roll about in the soft mud," he thundered.

Mr and Mrs Rabbit were outside. They heard Mr Piggy's rude remarks and observed Mrs Piggy's crestfallen face. Mrs Piggy apologized for her inability to help and the rabbit couple left knowing fully well that she was not to be blamed.

That day Mrs Rabbit looked after her babies at home and Mr Rabbit set off for the farm. He brought home many carrots and a couple of melons for Mrs Piggy.

"Give these melons to the piglings," said Mr Rabbit to his wife, handing over the melons to her.

"Didn't you see Mr Piggy's reaction when we needed help? Why should we be so kind as to give them melons for what they have not done? We have no obligation whatsoever towards the piggies," said Mrs Rabbit harshly.

"It is not possible to win love and affection by being quarrelsome. Let us teach Mr Piggy some good sense," said Mr Rabbit.

Mrs Rabbit saw the point in her husband's speech. She took the melons to the piggery.

Mr and Mrs Piggy were at home with the piglings. When they saw Mrs Rabbit and the melons she had brought for them they greeted her aloud and the piglings grunted in unison at the sight of the delicious fruits.

Handing over the melons to Mrs Piggy Mrs Rabbit said, "Here's something for your family. My husband got all this from the farm while I stayed home to look after our babies."

"Thank you very much," said Mr Piggy loudly and added, "whenever you need any help let us know. We'll be happy to look after your babies."

"Thank you," said Mrs Rabbit and left with a smile.

A good turn done to others brings about a change of heart.

8. The Gift

In Kerala, a beautiful place in South India, the majestic blue sea, dense green foliage, leaves glistening with dew drops and magnificent flowers have a magic of their own. During the Onam festival the boat race is the most spectacular among the celebrations. The womenfolk get busy decorating the verandahs of their homes with velvety floral carpets. There is enchantment in every garden, abundance in the orchards and a thrill of anticipation enlivens the air.

In the midst of this splendour there lived a poor fisherfolk family near the woods. They earned their living by catching fish. Manoj, their son, was only six years of age. He learned to read and write at a local school beyond the woods where the master had fifteen students of different ages.

Every day Manoj went to school and returned in the evening. His mother Anu

prepared rice and tasty fish curry, part of which was set aside for the next morning. Manoj had no neighbours and no playmates. He was an early riser. He ate some food which his mother set aside and got ready for school. He walked through the woods and on reaching school greeted his master respectfully and sat on a mat with the other boys. The master looked at his watch and said, "Have all the boys come?"

"Yes sir," said a voice from the rear.

"Stand for the prayer," said the master and the boys obeyed. When the prayer ended the students sat on the mat and the master took the attendance.

Then the lessons would begin. Dhiraj, Pankaj and Surak took turns in maintaining order when the master went out on any urgent work. He wanted the boys to have a proper school building with decent classrooms. In the evening, again after a prayer, the master dismissed the class. All the boys were from the housing colony nearby and did not have to go far. Manoj was the only one who had

to go beyond the woods in the opposite direction. He came home and said to his mother, "Ma, I have to come home alone without any companion. All the other boys live near the school."

His mother Anu told him, "Don't worry, son. The clump of trees with tall shadows through which you have to pass makes you feel you have to go a long way. In fact the school is only a short distance from home."

So Manoj was quiet for some days. On his way back from school he would stop near the brook or watch the colourful birds which fascinated him and then proceed home.

One day Anu called Manoj and asked, "Manoj, why are you late?"

"I was watching a kingfisher," came the quick reply.

"Manoj, don't spend time roaming around. After school come straight home. I keep waiting for you anxiously."

"It is so lonely walking alone," said Manoj again.

Anu patted her son and said, "When you return from school and pass by the thicket just say, 'Brother Mangal, are you there?'"

"O.K.," said Manoj absentmindedly, nodding his head.

The next day when Manoj was returning from school and the gentle breeze was blowing he called out, "Brother Mangal, where are you? Are you there?"

A little boy his own age showed himself and told Manoj, "Whenever you feel lonely call out to me." Then handing him a mango he added, "Here, keep this mango. It is from my tree."

Manoj took the mango and was happy he had a friend now. "Thank you. I am Manoj. I return this way from school every day," he said and smiled.

From then on the two boys met regularly and Mangal gave Manoj fruits and sweets to eat.

One day the master announced, "Tomorrow is a holiday. At four o'clock in the evening, my son Raj has invited you all for his birthday party."

"Thank you, Sir," said the boys in their native language, Malayalam. The lessons went on but the boys were not in a mood to study. Obviously they were thinking of the birthday feast.

When the boys went home they told their parents about Raj's birthday. They went to the nearest craftsman and each bought a small wooden toy for Raj. Manoj too told his mother the news. She was unwell and could not go out. His father had not come home as yet. The craftsman lived on the other side of the woods and they could not manage to get a gift at short notice.

Since the master had invited all the boys, Manoj too went. That day he called out to Mangal to tell him about the birthday and his problem about a gift.

Mangal came with a little tumbler of milk and after hearing Manoj he said, "Take this and give it to Raj." Then he waved and saw Manoj off.

When Manoj reached the venue he saw the colourful toys the others had brought. He felt

a little embarrassed to give his gift. Then, plucking up courage, he gave it with sincerity and announced that was the only gift he could get. The boys burst out laughing.

The master was displeased. 'What a gift,' he thought to himself. He placed the gift apart from the others and did not smile. The party went on in typical country style. All the boys ate homemade sweets. Then, the master took the tumbler of milk and poured it into a container. To his amazement as he went on pouring the container still remained full. Then, he poured out the milk in little tumblers for distribution. All the boys drank the milk, but the container still remained full.

'This is the best gift anyone could have brought Raj,' thought the master. 'I can sell the milk and use the proceeds for the school building.' In great surprise he asked Manoj, "From where did you get the milk?"

"My brother gave it to me," said Manoj.

"Don't tell me that. You have no brother," said the master.

"He lives in the woods," said Manoj.

"I want to meet your brother. Take me with you tomorrow," said the master.

The following day when the master went with Manoj the latter called out, "Brother Mangal, are you there?"

"Yes, I am here, but today you have a companion. I'll help you only when you feel lonely," said the voice.

The master turned to Manoj and said, "That is the kind wizard, Lala. He loves little children. When they need help he is always there."

From that day the master did not criticize any gift. 'Even a little gift brings happiness,' he thought.

In his spare time the master sold milk to the local residents. With the funds he obtained, he built a beautiful school and many children studied there.

God is our support. When no one is around he alone gives us courage and strength.

9. Lena, the Artiste

In one of the towns bordering south India there was a splendid mansion with arched doors and windows. The rays of the early morning sun penetrated through the well-ventilated hallway giving a glorious feeling. A rich lady and her pretty six-year-old daughter, Laura, lived there.

One day Laura's mother Nelly was purchasing fruits. She noticed a little girl sitting near the vendor. She asked him, "Is this cute girl who is helping you, your daughter?"

"Yes," came the prompt reply.

"She seems to be my daughter's age and could be a suitable playmate to her. I'll provide her with food, clothing, shelter and schooling. She can study part-time and will assist me for a few hours for which I'll amply reward her. Can she come along and stay with us?"

"Of course!" said the fruit seller and nodded in agreement. What better life could he expect for a poor motherless girl? Then he added, "She can go immediately."

Laila was hesitant but her father coaxed her. They were struggling and a good life remained a dream for them. Many times due to lack of customers the fruits perished. So, wishing her father good-bye tearfully she set off for her new home.

At first all went on well. Nelly was happy to see Laura bouncing with joy. Her studies seemed lighter and the routine seemed easier.

Laila did not have to worry about her necessities. In fact, in her new home she even enjoyed a few luxuries. Having discarded her old dresses she wore lacy and frilly ones. She had warm water for a bath and wore heeled shoes. Moreover, she quickly learned to read and write. Her father visited her sometimes. About year later her father fell ill and died.

The gardener's daughter Shanti was jealous of the new arrival. One day, a wicked thought crossed her mind. 'How come Laila is treated

so well? I have been here for a couple of years but no one cares for me. I must see that she is dismissed,' she thought.

When no one was looking Shanti went to the pantry, opened the jam bottle and touched it with her sticky fingers. Then, she left it on the shelf to look as if someone had hurriedly licked the jam. She wanted Laila to be accused and to get a scolding.

Nelly was on the terrace drying her hair in the sunshine. When she came down after a quarter of an hour she was shocked to see ants in her pantry.

"Who left the marmalade bottle open?" she asked and looked for an answer. No one responded. She repeated her question and looked at Laila who alone had access to the inner rooms. Laila pleaded, "I don't know anything about it aunty. I was playing outside with Laura."

Shanti was about to leave. Moreover, there was no use asking her. She worked in the garden.



Nelly was flummoxed. She suspected Laila. Calling her she said, "Look here my girl. If you have done wrong own up and don't do it again. I'll forgive you."

Laila refused to own up. "I did not go near the jam and I don't know who did it," she said sobbing.

"This time I'll forgive you," said the lady and gave her a scolding. Seeing Laila come under suspicion Shanti was happy.

After a few days Shanti saw madam removing her jewels and going for a bath. 'This is the time. I'll hide her trinkets in a basket. Laila and Laura are at their studies and don't know anything. Madam will blame Laila,' thought Shanti and quickly hid the bangles in a basket. Then she continued her work in the garden.

After her bath Nelly looked for her bangles and immediately sensed something wrong. The bangles were missing. This time she called Laila and Shanti and told them, "I have had enough. Both of you find my bangles which are missing."

Laila started weeping. Shanti pretended to search for a little while and brought the jewels out of a basket near the bedroom door and gave them to madam. Nelly was enraged. "I know who did this," she said. She called Laila and asked her, "Why did you steal my bangles?"

"I was studying in the verandah and don't know anything," wept the girl.

"You are dismissed. Pack your bag and leave. Here is a little extra money which you can use," Nelly said, and saw Laila off. Shanti pretended to put on a sad face but was quite glad. As for Laura, the bond of friendship cracked. She missed a dear friend who was like a sister ready to care for her and share her troubles.

Laila left weeping. She had no home. She walked and walked. When she was tired she sat under a tree and wept. This was a bitter experience for her. Some teachers saw her and led her to the town orphanage. Sr Mala who was in charge took her in. She spoke to her kindly and inquired about her past.

The routine at the orphanage was healthy. Early morning prayer, community life, devotional songs, fun and work were combined. Sr Mala kept a record of special talents among the pupils. Laila missed Laura and took a little time to get adjusted to the timetable.

Laila joined a singing troupe and also learned the *veena*. The group of three—Laila, Leela and Nita—became famous and were invited all over. The proceeds of the programmes were utilized for the welfare of the handicapped, the needy and the sick.

Sr Mala noticed that Laila was a dedicated worker with a strong desire for social work. People asked her for her autograph. Social work was a mission which she willingly accepted.

The singers had special names. Laila was known as Lena, Leela was called Sunila and Nita was Sunita.

A few years went by. Laura was now a beautiful young girl. After her studies she participated in sports and other modern

activities. She was interested in excitement and in picnics. Most of the time she was chasing dreams. She was proud of her new car and looked like a dream girl.

One day Laura injured her leg in an accident and was crippled. Her mother gave her all the comforts in life. Laura had an opportunity to be entertained by the singing troupe. She got comfort and peace of mind from the song. After the function she met the singers. While speaking to Lena she felt she had heard that voice before. She did not recognize Lena in her stage costume and heavy make-up.

After a minute or two Laura said to Lena, "Wait, don't I know you?" Then hesitating a minute she continued, "I had a playmate whose voice was like yours."

Seeing Laura's condition Lena was deeply moved. "Yes, I am Laila," she said with a smile and shook hands with Laura. At that moment she recalled the past and forgave her mother for sending her away without a proper enquiry.

Sr Mala was listening to their friendly talk. Later she arranged for Lena to visit Laura frequently and teach her devotional songs. Thus Laura and Lena remained friends.

Never blame others without a proper enquiry.

10. Caring and Sharing

It was a small town in the south of India, noted for its beauty. There were beautiful flowering trees on either side of the broad avenues. The colourful petals of the summer flowers looked like a soft velvet carpet at the foot of the trees. Many artists painted pictures of the lovely gardens, crimson dawn, wonderful rainbow and the golden sunset. The sweet fragrance of the champak, jasmine and rose and the enchanting melody of the birds attracted many people who later came to live there.

In one of the ancient cottages of this pretty town Roy and Julie settled down with their children Ranjan and Josephine. They had a poultry farm. The family began their day with a prayer and asked God to help them to spread His love around. 'Caring and Sharing' was their motto in life.

When times were good the family celebrated festivals with get-togethers. On good days they

invited a poor child from a school to spend the day with them and made her happy.

It was Josephine's birthday. The previous day Julie had asked her husband, "This year we have had a lot of expenses. Are we inviting our relatives over?"

"No. This year we'll have a simple celebration. Nevertheless, we'll invite a poor child for a meal. When funds improve we can celebrate on a grander scale," said Roy.

Josephine's birthday went off in a quiet manner. A little girl from the orphanage was their guest. She was quite happy with the food and sweets that her kind hosts provided her with that day.

During Christmas time, poultry sales improved and the family was in comfortable circumstances.

"Better days are ahead. We'll paint the house and change the curtains," said Roy to his son Ranjan.

"For Mum's birthday we'll decorate the place and send out cards," added Ranjan in an excited tone.

"That will give us an opportunity to meet our near and dear ones too," chipped in Josephine.

When Julie's birthday dawned some of their relatives and friends turned up. A cute girl from a charity school was also called. She sat in a corner looking at the sweets on the table.

Some guests looked at the poor child and thought that Roy was wasting his money. They were selfish by nature and wanted a share of his good fortune. They thought they had come to a kingdom full of riches and spoke about their own hardships.

"This place is majestic. I wish I could stay on here," said one man.

Another continued the conversation, "We don't get such fresh food in the next town where I live. This is a good place for a holiday."

A third added, "It would be interesting to stay on here."

The host replied, "There are constant ups and downs in life. Sometimes life goes on smoothly but later on hardships crop up. We

all trust in God. He helps us at every step of our life.”

The guests were under the impression that the family was rolling in money. Julie understood that. She explained, “On a good day we share our happiness with a poor child. That day is full of magic moments for the child and it gives us immense satisfaction.”

“This act of giving moves in circles. What we give comes back indirectly to us and we are able to keep the circle going,” said Ranjan, nodding his head.

Josephine added, “Today we have invited Veena, a girl from the school for the poor. Some children have no one to care for them. We believe in caring and sharing though we do it only in a small way.”

The guests who were only looking for food and fun got the message. That day all felt happy. After a prayer, songs, lunch and games they thanked their hosts and departed.

In the evening Ranjan and Josephine dropped Veena at her boarding. The day had been very special to her and she waved back at her

new friends with a smile. She told the other children in the boarding about her lovely day.

“I’ll prepare special food for Ranjan’s birthday,” said Mum.

“This time we’ll call our guests as well as the first poor child we come across,” said dad.

“I’ll decorate the house,” chimed in Josephine, rushing to the box to have a look at the decorations.

“The seating arrangement is my responsibility,” added Ranjan as he started arranging the chairs.

At last, it was Ranjan’s birthday. The warm slanting rays of the morning sun dispelling the cold mist heralded a new day. Music was turned on, playing at a moderate volume. Josephine wore her shiny dress and with her brother went out to invite a poor child to the festivities.

As things turned out Ranjan suddenly heard a cry on the next road. He looked out and stopped the car. An undernourished ragpicker



had been knocked down by a bicycle and the heartless rider did not even stop to give her any attention.

Ranjan and Josephine went over and helped the girl to get up. Her knee was bleeding and she felt unsteady.

"Let's take her in our car to the nearest doctor," said Ranjan.

"After that we can take this same child to our house," suggested Josephine.

"What is your name?" asked Ranjan, looking at the girl.

"Sonic," said the girl carelessly.

"We'll call her Sonica," said Josephine and then asked, "where do you live?"

To that she had no immediate reply. Then in a soft voice she said, "I have no home."

"Where are your parents?" questioned Ranjan.

"They died when I was small. I don't remember ever seeing them," said Sonica.

On reaching the dispensary Ranjan and Josephine showed Sonica's knee to the doctor. He bandaged it and gave her some tablets. Ranjan paid his fees and they drove home.

That day the ragpicker was their guest. Sonica felt unsettled. She was perplexed at the attention she was receiving.

"Come along. Use this soap. Have a wash, and comb your hair. Change into this dress," said Josephine, as she handed over a towel and a pink frock before leading the way and asking Sonica to follow.

Sonica smiled. She was confused as to what would follow. Till then no one had ever called her inside their home. The aroma of delectable food was in the air. Her stomach yearned for good food.

Sonica was excited. She had a quick bath, changed into her new dress, combed her hair and pinched herself to see if she was dreaming.

"Have some breakfast," said Josephine, giving Sonica some snacks and a cup of hot coffee.

"Thank you," said Sonica, her eyes wide open as she drew the plate towards her. She gobbled up the food and belched aloud. Obviously she was very hungry.

One by one the guests came along. When Ranjan cut the cake they all sang "Happy birthday to you."

Sonica sat in a corner. She was part of the small crowd. 'An unforgettable day,' she thought.

The guests now felt that sharing was part of living a really good life. They had changed their attitudes and spoke in praise of charity.

"We all know about sharing but how many of us really share like this?" said one of them.

Another said, "Good deeds are like oxygen. Both the giver and receiver feel happy and uplifted."

The next one added, "God rewards those who think of their weaker brethren."

"It is easy to offer lip sympathy when people suffer but actions speak louder than words."

The guests had lots of fun. They played musical chairs, passing the parcel, tailing the

donkey and enjoyed the treasure hunt. Everyone enjoyed the food and smacked their lips. At the end of the day they thanked their hosts and left with a smile.

"We should take Sonica to the 'Happy Home'. She is only skin and bone. Sr Lisa will see to the rest," said Mum.

Sr Lisa was in charge of the orphanage. She looked after little children who had no families and found them good homes. She made each child feel special. She sounded a chord in the hearts of the helpless and abandoned. Having a unique ability to understand the feelings of others, she motivated the children and lit a lamp in their hearts. The children felt wanted. The bigger ones were given education and training in arts and crafts.

Sr Lisa said to the teachers, "God has given each child a special gift. We'll discover that talent and with our combined efforts, we'll bring about a change in their lives. We'll identify their natural gifts and help them to progress. Drawing, painting, gardening and needle-craft are some of the activities we should encourage."

Taking Sonica along, Ranjan and Josephine reached Happy Home.

Sonica was cute and innocent. When Ranjan and Josephine brought her in, the maid in charge led them to Sr Lisa's room. Sr Lisa welcomed them and on hearing the pathetic tale of the ragpicker took her in. A feeling of joy and thankfulness swept through Sonica as she waved to Ranjan and Josephine when they left.

Placing her hand on Sonica's shoulder, Sr Lisa led her inside. Sonica was taller than the other children. "This is your bed," said Sr Lisa as she showed the girl a cosy bed. It was evening. The other children were ready for prayers which would be followed by their night meal. Meals were assured. That was the beginning of a new life for Sonica. Now she could have dreams of her own.

Sonica was happy now. But some of the children were mischievous. They giggled at her. They wrapped up coloured paper to resemble sweets and placed those under her pillow. Then, standing a little way away, they watched as she made her bed, and laughed.

One child messed up some paints and wiped her hands on Sonica's bed sheet. Another child put the maid's umbrella under Sonica's mattress. She wanted the maid to blame Sonica for theft.

A teacher who happened to notice all that the children did, rebuked them and reported the matter to Sr Lisa.

"That is innocent fun. It will soon settle down," said Sr Lisa with a twinkle in her eye and she was right.

Happy Home, with a garden of phlox and other brightly-coloured flowers looked like paradise and the children looked like 'Alices in Wonderland'. They were energetic and cheerful. Some were later adopted by parents and found good homes. Others got help to develop their skills which would help them be successful in life. Each child had specific duties besides studies.

Sonica's miseries had vanished overnight. Taking a deep breath of fresh air, she smiled at her companions. The pleasant turn in her life seemed like magic to her.

With a merry twinkle in her eyes Sr Lisa called each child to her and asked, "Tell me, how do you feel here? Do you like living here?"

The children vigorously nodded their heads in the affirmative. Their joy spoke more than a thousand words.

Sonica was a late arrival in class but she soon made friends. Asha and Nita were her classmates.

"I'll share my notes with you so that you can learn fast," said Asha in a low tone. Sonica was excited by her friendship with Asha. She was the first friend in her life.

Nita was good in studies but wasn't very helpful. She felt the newcomer might get better grades than herself.

One day Sonica did not understand her Maths homework. Asha was ill and was absent. Sonica asked Nita, "Please would you help me with my homework?"

Nita replied in a disinterested tone, "Why worry about it? We have a little playtime now. Let's run around and play hide and seek."

The next day in class the teacher asked, "How many of you did not do your homework?"

Sonica alone stood up. "I don't know how to do the sums, Miss," she said.

"Take more interest in your studies. Today I'll excuse you," said the teacher.

From that day Sonica took a keener interest in studies and passed all the tests. The teacher was pleased.

In Happy Home there was a cookery section, a drawing section and a handicrafts section. The children had interesting hobbies such as basket weaving, candle making, painting and singing. This apart, they also liked gardening.

For 'Talents' Day' the teacher asked the children to do a painting. Nita painted the sunset and Sonica painted the four seasons. In her picture she had flowers in full bloom and a swan swimming near a lotus. It looked enchanting but before she could complete it a maid came up and said, "The teacher wants you to check the stationery for the month."

"I'll come right now," said Sonica and hurried away.

Meanwhile Nita thought, 'I'll go and see what Sonica is painting.'

When she saw the picture she exclaimed, "How lovely! I'll exchange my painting for this picture." She quickly took Sonica's picture and leaving her picture of the sunset in its place, ran away.

When Sonica returned after her duty she felt sad. "This is not my painting," she said aloud. No one was around and it was useless talking about it. Sonica was not the kind of girl to make a fuss and complain, making an issue of every small thing. She kept silent over the matter.

The next day all the paintings were exhibited. At the show the judges said, "The four seasons has been selected as the best picture. Come up and take your prize, Nita."

Nita's conscience pricked her. But more than that she was scared. She felt she would be caught sometime or the other. 'What if Sonica tells everyone that it is her painting?'

She thought to herself. She felt guilty and wished she had not stolen it. He also realized the wrong she had done to Sonica.

The judges called out Nita's name again. Nita went to Sonica and held her hand. Both went up to the stage. Nita said openly, "This is actually Sonica's painting."

The judges were amazed. The other girls looked up with wide open eyes and cheered.

Sonica said, "But I did not complete the lotus."

"Whatever you have done deserves praise," said the judges and gave Sonica the prize. Her eyes shone and she forgave Nita. This event sparked off a firm friendship between Nita and Sonica. Deep down in their hearts there was contentment and happiness.

At the Happy Home the children had good opportunities. Many donors came forward to assist the children to progress in life.

One afternoon during a break, all were relaxing in the shade of a may flower tree. Sr Lisa asked Sonica, "What is your aim in

life?" Sonica brightened up and said, "I want to share my happiness with the poor children and care for them."

"How fast you have learnt so many skills!" said Sr Lisa.

"All with your help," said Sonica quite pleased.

Sr Lisa said, "We need to start a canteen. You are capable of running one and we'll give you a room and a helper. You'll be in charge of supplying fruit juice, midday snacks and tea. You'll earn a tidy sum."

"This is music to my ears," said Sonica jumping with joy. She was not a small child any more. She accepted the job immediately.

The canteen was a big success. Sonica organized herself well and was a great help to the little children. A few months later as she peeped out of the room, she saw a school bus dropping a little girl in a neighbouring house in the afternoon. The girl entered a grilled verandah, sat on a bench and opened her lunch box. A dog put its paws on her lap.

She gave a little food to the dog, ate a little herself and watched the birds around. No one seemed to be at home. The child did not have companions to talk to or play with. In the evening her mother came home and attended to her. Sonica watched this routine day after day.

One sunny day when Sonica was free she walked over to the girl and asked, "What is your name?"

"Nikki," came the smart reply.

"Here are a few snacks. Tell me if you like them. I live opposite," said Sonica and left.

Nikki took a liking to Sonica. Sonica too felt Nikki was a good child.

The following day Sonica boldly walked over to Nikki's mother and said, "Madam, I live just opposite. In case you wish your child to be looked after for a few hours you may leave her with me."

Nikki's mother, Meena, realized that it was a golden opportunity that someone so kind had come forward offering help.



"Yes, please! I need some help badly. The school bus will drop Nikki at your place from tomorrow and I'll pick her up on my return from the office," said Meena.

Nikki was very happy with this arrangement. Sonica gave her snacks, toys and books to read. She also made her do her homework. Nikki was not lonely anymore.

One day Meena told her husband who had returned home after a transfer, "The new routine is going on very well. We need not worry about Nikki. Sonica is looking after her until I return."

"Who is Sonica?" asked Ranjan, her husband, thinking deeply as he recollected long-forgotten days. His sister Josephine had migrated and after their parents' death they had sold their ancestral house and shifted to a modern house.

"She is the lady who runs the canteen for Happy Home," said Meena.

Ranjan was confused. "That was the name we had given a ragpicker twelve years back. Could it be the same girl? I must see who she

is," he said, getting more interested in the subject.

The following day Ranjan looked across into the canteen. A slim, young, fashionable well-mannered lady with a modern haircut was busy in the canteen.

'It may not be the same girl but there is a remote chance that it could be Sonica. If so, she has progressed a lot,' thought Ranjan to himself.

Along with Nikki, Ranjan and Meena went to Happy Home and met Sr Lisa. He explained that he was out of station most of the time and could not keep in touch. Ranjan sought for information about the girl Sonica, he had brought to Happy Home years back.

Sr Lisa's eyes were gleaming. She took them to the canteen and introduced them to Sonica who had turned out to be such a wonderful human being. They shook hands and smiled.

"You won't remember me, but I just have to tell you how happy I am that you are doing so well," said Ranjan looking at Sonica.

A pleasant whiff of happiness swept through their hearts. There were smiles, more smiles, and rejoicing.

Looking at Sr Lisa and Meena, Ranjan said, "Sr Lisa will have so much to tell us. We'll be happy to hear not only about Sonica but about all the children in Happy Home. This year the children will have a special treat at Christmas."

The feeling of happiness had a ripple effect. Sr Lisa smiled with satisfaction.

"Praise the Lord! This is truly a lovely day."

"Yes indeed!" said Nikki.

"Caring and sharing always brings blessings," said Ranjan, quite pleased to announce loudly the old family motto.